

The social crisis in Greece: Part Two

“If you visit a hospital right now you will see that they are in shambles”

Our reporters
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This is the second article of a two-part series on the social crisis in Greece. Part one was posted March 9.

Today 3 million Greeks, around a quarter of the population, have no health insurance and no right to receive state-funded health care.

The European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund's Greek austerity programme insists that spending on public health cannot rise above 6 percent of GDP. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) figures, health spending per head in Greece dropped by 25 percent between 2009 and 2012, and has not improved since.

Imposing these unprecedented cuts has destroyed an advanced public health care system built up over decades.

The human cost has been staggering. Two health care trade unions issued figures in September 2014 showing that 850 medical clinics have been abolished, 10,000 beds shut down and 30,000 front-line positions removed. Eleven hospitals have closed since the beginning of the crisis.

Six thousand doctors at public clinics have been laid off. Funding for mental health care has been slashed by 55 percent.

Public spending on pharmaceuticals has more than halved, leading to 200 medicines being destocked by pharmacies. The budget cuts have led to new fees for prescriptions and charges for outpatient visits to hospital being raised from €3 to €5.

Evgenia Thanou is the general manager of *Medicin du Monde* (Doctors of the World). It provides free health care to those who can't afford it and has five poly-clinics in Greece. The organisation provides other

vital services, including helping 1,800 families with food supplies.

Thanou told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “In an interview three years ago Doctors of the World predicted that Greece was on the verge of a humanitarian crisis. ... At the time we were told that we were being over the top—not just by the government, but also by other NGOs, which didn't see this coming.

“Unfortunately we have been proved correct. If you visit a hospital right now you will see that they are in shambles. You will see patients in wards, but no staff. You will see relatives at the bedside of patients carrying out nursing duties.”

Thanou continued, “In July last year the Greek government issued health cards to people with no medical coverage. According to official statistics there are around 3 million people in Greece without such coverage, but these cards were given out to only 500,000. These cards do not grant full access to the health care system every time a person gets sick, but only cover a maximum of one sickness event per year. In effect these people are still without cover. For instance, if I get the flu now and I use my card, then if I get sick again in spring I won't have access to the health care system.”

In 2012, a mother was told she would not be able to take her newborn baby home: “The woman was uninsured and went to a public hospital to give birth, but because she could not pay for the delivery the hospital authorities would not give her the baby. Our organization intervened in this case and publicized it. As a result, babies are not taken away from mothers anymore. However, the debt is not written off, but is transferred onto the tax code of either the mother or the

father.”

This has created new problems since if a person owes more than €5,000 in tax then an immediate arrest warrant is issued and he or she is taken into custody until that debt is paid off: “For example, the situation of a woman with no health coverage giving birth in a public hospital would typically indicate that her husband already owed money in tax and for this reason had not kept up with payments into his health insurance fund and had other expenses to cover.

“Hence, even though the mother could take the baby home, there would be a danger that the husband would go to jail. In one case our organization paid the €1,500 cost of delivery so that the woman’s husband would not go to jail.”

The authorities have stopped at nothing to enforce suffering: “There are people being supported by Doctors of the World who would phone us from jail and we would go there to visit them with their medicine. These people had been jailed because they had exceeded the €5,000 tax limit. They had committed no crime; they hadn’t robbed anyone. They simply owed money as a result of being unemployed.”

Thanou said the situation was “very challenging and we are not here to replace the state. It’s the state’s responsibility. We’re here to assist.”

Thanou explained that people have died and many more are having their lives imperilled by the health cuts: “There are people with tumours who can’t afford the cost of chemotherapy, which costs €2,500 for a single dose. As a result there are people who have died because they have not been able to get the correct treatment from the point of diagnosis.

“We can’t give an overall number because we only see the cases that come to us. We can, however, say that people have indeed died as a result of the crisis in the Greek health care system. People with a chronic illness face many problems.

“There are only one or two pharmaceutical companies that still operate in Greece. The rest have left. The ones that are still here find it more profitable to export drugs instead of supplying the Greek market. As a result, if drugs are needed these have to be reimported.

“Before the crisis there was an overconsumption of drugs supplied by multinationals via doctors and the various deals that were made. This was directly

fostered and encouraged by government policy. We said that this was not right, that drugs should only be administered when they’re really needed, rather than to prop up huge pharmaceutical giants who profit at the expense of patients. However, [in 2010] patients were held to ransom [with the supply of drugs abruptly withheld], which was not right because once again it was the uninsured and innocent people who paid the price.”

We asked Thanou what she thought would happen if there were an epidemic in Greece today. She replied, “If there was an epidemic outbreak in Greece it would have a massive impact and unfortunately we don’t know what we would be able to do and how it would be tackled.

“That’s why we’re all praying that something of this magnitude doesn’t happen, because we believe that we won’t be able to cope. When the Ebola epidemic broke out, because we have people [from Africa] that pass through Greece either in transit or to stay, we were praying that it wouldn’t spread to Greece because we knew we would not be able to handle it at all.”



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